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Atari Online News, Etc.
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~ New Version of SainT! ~ Making Web Kids Safe! ~ No Fragments #2!
~ Netscape Rises Again! ~ Whopper AOL Phone Bill ~ Web Tax Ban Revival
~ Net Piracy Crackdown! ~ Why EU Fined Microsoft ~ Win Apps On Linux?

-* Return of Leisure Suit Larry *-
-* FTC To Take Closer Look at Spyware! *-
-* Many E-mail Marketers Fail CanSpam Ruling! *-

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->From the Editor's Keyboard

"Saying it like it is!"

Ask, and ye shall receive! Isn't that how it works? Well, it has worked that way over this past week - we finally got some nice weather this week! This past weekend started off fairly nice, and then we had up and down temperatures, starting on Patriot's Day - naturally much too hot for the Boston Marathon runners. By the time you read this, I will hopefully have been out and played some golf, getting rid of some over-abundance of work-related stress! We may get some rain showers, but I really don't care!

I don't have a lot to say this week. Well, actually I do, but it's likely unfit for these pages! Fortunately, with the rapid improvement of the weather, my disposition will also improve. It's time to get out, relax, and enjoy the time of the year. I'll drink to that!

Until next time...

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SainT v1.61

A new version of the ST emulator SainT is available.

In window mode, keeping right control key pressed runs emulator at full speed

* "Pause" key used to take screenshot when demo or game is running

* Added quick image disk launch command line option to be used by great demo database project (<http://www.gamebasesst.com/>)

* weird bug fixed when reading .L at \$fffffe on 1Mb machine (Illusion demo "glenz vector" part)

* NULL shifter address when reset fixed (Just-Bugin and Anomaly demo reset fixed)

* MFP IPL level interrupt bug fixed (Giga-TEX screen in "Life's a bitch"

demo)

* Strange YM write behavior fixed (X-Out music) Thanks to Ben/Ovr for info!

<http://leonard.oxg.free.fr/SainT/saint.html>

No Fragments #2 Released

No Fragments, the collection of demos and intros for Atari ST/STe has been updated with a second CD.

This new release compilation of intros and demos, over 900 compilation disks collected by Stefan Benz.

<http://no-fragments.atari.org/>

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. It's still a long way off, but I've been thinking about the upcoming general election. To those of you who live outside the United States, I apologize for burdening you with this. I don't know for sure how it is in other countries, but here in the states people tend to complain that no one ever DOES anything about political problems and then do absolutely nothing when they have the chance.

Let me put it in somewhat unusual terms... Every four years, we get a chance to overthrow the government!

Now there are those who will say that no matter who we elect we're just getting more of the same, but they're wrong. It's a matter of choice and of exercising your rights. And it's not just a right, but a responsibility. The founding fathers understood that most people would rather complain than actually make a choice, so they made it fairly easy to stand up and be counted. So stand right on up!

We really DO get a chance to overthrow the establishment every four years. But even more than that, we are a society governed by laws instead of mere brute strength. Yes, the brutish mindset has, does, and will make itself known from time to time, but by and large we are governed by laws that we ourselves have set into motion.

And that can sometimes be a problem. You know the saying "be careful of what you wish for"? Well nowhere does it come into play more clearly.

Let's take a look at the last election. You know, the one where someone got half a million less votes than the other guy and became president anyway? Well, in most other countries there would have been riots and

gunplay in the streets. While I still scratch my head over the results, I'm incredibly proud of the way we handled it.

The current world situation? Well, I don't pretend to know all the particulars (I've only been privy to one Daily Presidential Briefing), and it's not my intention to either defend or oppose what's going on here in this column. That's not my point. My point is that we... well, we get a chance to overthrow the government every four years. I know that some of you are, even now, rolling your eyes and saying "yeah, right". But the fact remains that we enjoy rights and privileges that others are willing to fight and die for. And all we have to do to keep them is USE them.

So the main thing I want to say is GET OUT THERE AND VOTE! If you're not registered, get yourself to Town Hall and register! It only takes a few moments and you'll then be able to complain to your heart's content about everything in the government that you don't like. I'll bet the folks at ROCK THE VOTE never thought of using THAT as an inducement!

Don't like the current administration? VOTE! Don't like the idea that someone else may get in and undo what's been done? VOTE! Don't like the balance of power in the House or Senate? VOTE! Afraid of the Patriot Act? VOTE! Don't like your tax rate? VOTE! Get the idea?

If you don't vote, then you can just sit your butt down and shut your cakehole for four years. If you don't vote, you don't get to complain. So if you like to complain... VOTE! <grin>

And for you 'activists' who think it's enough to listen to a talk radio show or whine about the state of things after a few brews at the local bar, wise up! Any fool can make a lot of noise and rant and rave... I do it almost weekly! <grin>

There are also more and more of us who have resigned themselves to voting 'against' somebody. While that bothers me, voting AGAINST someone is still better than not voting at all. But I'm sure that if you look around you can find something worth voting for in one of the candidates.

Well, I'm sure that I'll have more to say on the subject in the coming weeks and months (you just KNEW it, didn't you?), but for now, I vote that we get to the news, hints, tips and info from the UseNet.

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup
=====

'Michael' asks for help with an old game:

"I have this vague recollection of a game on the ST, kinda like one of those tile-matching games (Shanghai or whatever it's called) but when you clicked two tiles, not only did they have to have the same pattern, but they also had to be connectable by some small number--possibly 3?--of horizontal and vertical line segments, which was not always possible given intervening tiles, so the order in which you matched them was important. And you played against the clock.

Does that ring a bell with anyone?

I'm hoping someone will recognize the game and be able to refresh my

memory as to exactly what the "connectability" rules were. Or perhaps there's a PC version out there?"

Eric Bozon asks if the name was...

"Match it ?

ST version ("ST magazine N° 59") :

<http://stmagazine.free.fr/archives/index.php>

DOS version ("Telecharger") :

<http://www.abandonware-france.org/lrf-jeu.php3?id=526> "

Steve Stupple tells Eric:

"There were several games called match it, i tried to get further info on the site link above but kept getting page not found.... probably my isp having routing problems again.

The match it i liked was if I remember correctly a demo, and had background music that you either liked or loathed. It was a full working game though. Very easy at the start but as the time got shorted at later levels, you also had to think so that you didn't get a stalemate.

Where this was different from the rest is that you earned helps, if you didn't need a hint you would gain an additional help credit."

Eric asks Steve:

"

A kind of Japanese music ?

MATCHIT.TOS is the game file, but the demo isn't in the ZIP file (sorry... some functions of the game can't be used for this reason)
This game can be run on STEEM Engine for PC

>>It was a full working game though. Very easy at
>> the start but as the time got shorted at later levels, you also had to
>> think so that you didn't get a stalemate.

"Checkmated" in the game (sorry for orthography...)"

John Miskinis adds:

"Well, there was a great game called "Nevermind", by (sp?) Psygnosis. You had to gather and paste tiles of an image together in the correct manner, against a running clock and other obstacles"

'Sam F' asks about Speedo GDOS:

"Where can one obtain SpeedoGdos....mine's toast.

Do I need it? I guess I do if I'm using Atariworks eh? I do have NVDI though."

Mark Duckworth tells Sam:

"NVDI I guess, depending on the version, should offer all of the functionality of speedogdos and more."

Brian Roland adds his opinion:

"NVDI 4 is mucho better than Speedo as bundled with Atari Works! Faster, speeds up overall VDI, supports more font-types, likely more printers too.... In some respects NVDI 4 is maybe even better than version 5. Since you have it...go with NVDI!"

'Peter' tells Brian:

"I agree. Note, however, that Atari Works can only handle (I think) a total of 255 fonts - if you have more than that in your BITFONTS (and/or TTF) folders, only the first 255 will be available.

AFAIK, this is a restriction of AW and *not* NVDI/SpeedoGDOS. It's one reason why I switched to Papyrus and now Tempus-Word NG, which don't have that restriction (I have 317 Speedo fonts in BTTFONTS plus another often-used 19 TTFs in a TEMPFONT folder that are normally in use - the TTF folder with another 2400-odd fonts is normally not used directly, as I copy any TTF fonts required to the TEMPFONT folder).

And no - I don't use all of them, or remember what they all are - but luckily Papyrus provides a preview in its font selector, and I also have the German Hugo font selector that offers a preview in other programs."

Derryck Croker adds:

"I don't know if NVDI4 included "Font Tools", but NVDI5 does and it makes enabling/disabling fonts a breeze - this is something that Speedo does not do if I remember correctly."

Greg Goodwin adds his thoughts:

"In my opinion SpeedoGDOS is inferior to NVDI4 overall. That isn't to say that there aren't a couple of things SpeedoGDOS does better, but if you have NVDI4, you likely will never miss SpeedoGDOS.

I started in the world of fonts with SpeedoGDOS (and used Warp 9 for acceleration). When I purchased NVDI4 (from someone leaving Atari) I set my machine up to provide the option to boot either SpeedoGDOS or NVDI4. Over the years I found there was never really any reason not to use NVDI4, so I deleted SpeedoGDOS from my hard drive a couple of years back.

For what it's worth, if your printer works, there really isn't much reason to get NVDI5. I'm using 5.03 on my CT60ed Falcon, but reverted to 4.x on my stock Falcon due to strange behavior in PageStream."

David Ormand asks for opinions on whether a PC (Intel) or PPC New-Age Atari computer would be preferable:

"I know this is an old topic, but with the recent interest in Pegasos (mine, too!) I thought I'd bring it up again.

What would it take to turn a PPC machine (Pegasos or Power Mac) or a pcc into an Atari? Not an emulator, but the OS and applications running natively on the non-M68K platform? Think "linux", how the OS and applications are all source distributions that are compiled to run natively on a variety of platforms. How close is the Atari world to being able to pull that off?

Am I right? -> We need BIOS/XBIOS/GEMDOS running in x86 machine code talking directly to the basic set of pcc hardware, and AES/VDI running on top of that, and MiNT and/or a suitable desktop (Teradesk?) running on top of that, and the basic set of applications running on top of that.

EmuTOS is BIOS/XBIOS/GEMDOS, is it not? Right now, it is intended to run on top of an emulation layer, such as ARAnyM. I've taken a quick peek at EmuTOS; it is mostly C-code with some M68K assembly that could probably be ported; this is perhaps the "arch" layer.

How portable is fVDI? Peeking at the version shipped with ARAnyM, there is a fair bit of assembly, but it is all/mostly short subroutines.

Do we have a maintained open-source AES, like oAESis? How portable is MiNT?

I know this is a lot of work, with too few hands, but as well as ARAnyM is doing, it is still "just" an emulator, and while I appreciate the work Rudolphe is doing with CT60, and rumors of Atari ColdFire, the only real path forward for Atari is Intel(ish) and PowerPC.

Or is it really even feasible? Is emulation the best we can ever really do, even theoretically, given the design (or lack of it) of the core Atari SW to depend so heavily on the underlying hardware architecture?"

Standa Opichal tells David:

"I've been thinking about that quite some time.... However I think about it as about what do we really want to keep.

There are two kinds of applications there, first the open-source applications that we can rebuild whenever we would like (have enough motivation) and second there are the old apps that are effectively unsupported.

Assuming we all don't want to dig deep into the OS kernel (like I quite enjoy in the FreeMiNT's case) we just need to run all the existing apps somewhere.

New apps being ported are facing more and more problems regarding the OS features like virtual memory, shared libraries, threads etc. I tent to think that if we want to turn our systems to be up-to-date featured OS running all the things we like then we need to change the underlying OS architecture (or implement the missing pieces which is unlikely). For changing the kernel say to BSD one we need to maintain the BIOS/XBIOS/GEMDOS/VDI/AES calling conventions which are not acceptable in a decent architecture (they are coming from a single tasking TOS, you know). There are some chances now to change this API for the newly appearing VDI and AES implementations, however. Once we change these bindings we can port the VDI/AES virtually to any OS we use. The BIOS/XBIOS/GEMDOS are not really needed, because the OS kernel we would use does already have a replacement. We can create a dynamic library with a compatible API on a programing language level.

Still there is no good enough way to support the old apps in this scheme for which we would always need to run the emulation layer to fulfill the TOS-like bindings requirements.

Now....

Taking the fact that there are about 150 platform users all over the world - guessing from the fact that Rodolphe can't sell more CT60's recently which is an absolute need for a non-gaming user the key questions are:

- * Who would ever use this new VDI/AES like OS?
- * If there are enough users who would write/port new apps to that and _debug_ them?
- * Do people care nowadays? "

David tells Stan:

"Okay, this is the core of the question.

I'm going to reveal a bit of my ignorance. MiNT does NOT use the built-in BIOS/XBIOS/GEMDOS, does it? It's my understanding that TOS (and in particular EmuTOS under ARAnyM) is used by MiNT only for booting. Once running, MiNT runs independently and in full control of the hardware, in pretty much the same way Linux boots from the peecce BIOS and then ignores it. So all this modern OS stuff you mention, like virtual memory, shared libraries, threads, etc., would be built into MiNT (if it is not already). MiNT becomes the modern OS, and the driver set you build/select when installing MiNT is appropriate to the hardware platform you are using, in exactly the same way as linux.

The BIOS/XBIOS/GEMDOS stuff can remain however friendly or unfriendly they may be to multitasking, since they would only be used in the case of someone wanting a system that boots quickly and runs simple, unsophisticated applications - exactly the case of DOS on the peecce, which still supports a thriving community.

This is actually one of my keen interests in the question. An ST boots very quickly into singleTOS and can load and run a TOS or GEM app in much less time than even a hot peecce can boot linux, not to mention starting ARAnyM. But hot peecces are not cheap, and by the time you add a Link or IDE adapter and even an old hard drive, an ST is not exactly

cheap, either, and certainly not "stock". A new Atari OS that boots into singleTOS on an old 486sx gets you a fast-booting machine that's practically free. A new Atari OS that boots into MiNT on a hot peecee gives a great migration path for the community.

The model of the transition of the Macintosh comes immediately to mind. The new OS is native PPC, but old M68K binaries can be run via an emulation layer. The work on ARAnyM could be adapted to this role. Yes, it IS an emulation layer, but in this scenario, the emulation is on top of a real Atari OS, rather than masking the underlying foreign OS."

'Sylwek' adds:

"I think most users would like to see new platform. And it could be PowerPC, as most users voted in this poll:

<http://www.atari-users.net/modules.php?op=modload&name=NS-Polls&file=inde x&req=results&pollID=8>

According to Rodolphe Czuba some people in France already work on porting Atari OS to the cheapest and most modern PowerPC platform - Pegasos."

Well folks, that's it for this week. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Leisure Suit Larry Returns!
***** Run the Playboy Mansion!
Godzilla: Save the Earth!
And much more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

The Lovable Loser Returns on PC and Videogame Consoles in
Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude

Vivendi Universal Games announced today that Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude, the next installment in the best-selling and beloved PC franchise, Leisure Suit Larry, is scheduled for release this Fall on PC, PlayStation2

computer entertainment system and the Xbox video game system from Microsoft. This will be the first time ever that Leisure Suit Larry will be available on console systems.

The Leisure Suit Larry videogame franchise began in 1987 with The Land of the Lounge Lizards, the first of seven games in the series. Since then, the Leisure Suit Larry games have sold millions of units worldwide and its games are considered collector's items.

Developed by High Voltage Software, Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude is the coming of age story of Larry Lovage, nephew of Larry Laffer, the series' original lovable loser. In Magna Cum Laude, Lovage starts as a sixth-year-senior enrolled at the local community college, and spends most of his time in his dorm room or on campus striking out with women. After hearing about a reality TV dating show visiting his college campus, Larry resolves to revitalize his life and get on the show. Over the course of the game, Larry sets out on an epic search for love (or its equivalent) and finds that things don't always go as planned.

Players will be able to experience hilarious college moments as they explore 20 different locations on and around the college campus, interacting with sexy female characters and play dozens of mini-games, including Quarters, Tapper, Trampoline and Wet T-shirt Contests. With more than 90,000 words of dialogue, players can create custom conversations in real time as Larry speaks with more than 15 beautiful girls, as well as interacting with a host of other characters.

"Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude aims to please fans of the original PC game while extending the franchise experience to console gamers," said Michael Pole, EVP, Worldwide Studios, Vivendi Universal Games. "The game captures the distinctive style and feel of the original series, and revitalizes it with contemporary humor and gameplay."

Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude video game has not yet been rated by the ESRB.

Playboy: The Mansion Ready for Action on PlayStation2

Co-publishers Groove Games and ARUSH Entertainment today announced that their upcoming, highly anticipated title Playboy: The Mansion, published under license from Playboy Enterprises, will be available on the PlayStation2 computer entertainment system during the 2004 Holiday season.

Currently under development at Cyberlore Studios, Playboy: The Mansion is a unique gaming experience that seamlessly combines intriguing social interaction, party-throwing simulation and empire-building challenges.

"As you can imagine, we're all very excited about this project," said Joe Minton, CEO of Cyberlore Studios. "From the very beginning we've put a great deal of effort into making this groundbreaking game a fun and sexy experience for the PS2."

The game puts the player into the virtual slippers of world-famous Playboy Founder Hugh Hefner, building Playboy Magazine and the Playboy Mansion into dynamic cultural icons. Gamers also will live the lifestyle, rubbing elbows with stunning women and popular celebrities, and share the mystique of the Mansion by hosting extravagant, exciting parties. Smart management

of the Mansion's social scene is required to keep the business thriving, and scoring hot celebrity interviews and arranging sexy photo shoots are just some of the tasks that players will encounter in growing the empire. The innovative Photoshoot gameplay allows the player to take control of the camera, shoot models for magazine covers and pick and choose the best overall theme for each issue in order to maintain the excellence that the buying public demands.

"Playboy: The Mansion is an ambitious, clever title that will be right at home on the PlayStation2 system," said Jim Perkins, president and CEO of ARUSH Entertainment. "This game is unlike anything console gamers have ever seen before, and will raise the bar for simulation and empire-building games."

Rendered in a beautiful 3D environment including actual Playboy estate areas such as the Game House and the world-famous Playboy Grotto, the game portrays an accurate, virtually livable version of the actual Playboy Mansion. Gamers can also create their own versions of the Mansion as they step into the role of the Playboy mogul, hosting lavish parties designed to be the envy of Hollywood. With Campaign and Empire modes, players can either follow an intriguing and involved storyline, or be set loose to explore and create on their own.

The release of Playboy: The Mansion marks Playboy's entry into the video game category and underlines the growth of Playboy's licensing business in the entertainment arena. In addition to game industry advertising and merchandising initiatives, ARUSH and Groove will aggressively market the game in Playboy magazine and on Playboy.com to support the launch. Playboy readers spent over \$300 million on video games over the last year with more than 3.1 million readers owning a video game system.

Playboy: The Mansion, distributed in North America by Hip Interactive, will be on display at the Electronic Entertainment Expo in May 2004 in West Hall Booth 2208. For more information on the game, please visit <http://www.PlayHef.com>.

Survival-Horror is Redefined as Players Suspend Their Disbeliefs in the Unsettling World of Siren for PlayStation2

Sony Computer Entertainment America announced today the release of Siren, available exclusively for the PlayStation 2 computer entertainment system. Developed by Sony Computer Entertainment Japan, in conjunction with Sony Computer Entertainment America's Santa Monica Studios, Siren puts the player into an alternate reality, capable of raising the heartbeat and creating a true sense of suspense and fear allowing for a new horror thriller entertainment experience. Set in a fictional Japanese village, a terrible force slowly turns the civilians into vile creatures. Seen through the eyes of ten characters, Siren immerses the player into a personal fight for survival and to unravel the truth behind the mysterious force.

With a story loosely inspired by Japanese folklore and horror movies from around the world, Siren places the gamer right in the center of the village of Hanuda. Building upon a dark atmosphere and creeping terror, Siren heralds an exciting new genre of horror thriller games - from a world of fear, mystery and suspense that is focused on extreme background detail and storyline, rather than 'slasher-style' shocks traditionally found in horror

entertainment.

"Siren represents the changing face of horror thriller entertainment and pushes the PlayStation 2 technology to new heights," said Ami Blaire, director, product marketing, Sony Computer Entertainment America. "By placing the player in a riveting setting and chilling experience, Siren is a unique adventure that transcends traditional boundaries between the player and terror by presenting a unique twist on reality that will keep gamers on their feet as they unravel the mystery occurrence in the game and leaving them wanting more."

In Siren, which takes place over the course of three days, time is made irrelevant as episodes do not happen in chronological order and the story builds as the player uses their own character's psychic abilities to look through the eyes of the shibito. The shibito or 'living dead' are civilians in the village that have been slowly transforming into evil creatures that are out to destroy the player. Players can steal the viewpoint of the shibito in their surroundings by using the innovative 'sightjack' system, foreseeing danger and predicting enemies' actions. However, in this world of unspeakable evil and horrific visions, this extraordinary observational power could be more of a curse than a blessing. With 78 missions in the game, every individual has their own chilling story to tell throughout the various episodes, providing not only a mission to survive, but an opportunity to slowly piece together the horrifying events that have overcome the village of Hanuda.

The independent Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) has rated Siren "M" for Mature.

Godzilla: Save the Earth Announced For Playstation 2 And Xbox

Atari is returning Godzilla and his titanic sized foes to video game consoles this Fall with Godzilla: Save the Earth, an epic action adventure game featuring grand scale nuclear-powered monster-bashing mayhem. Based on the classic character movie license from Toho Co., Ltd., Godzilla: Save the Earth will faithfully recreate the look and feel of the gargantuan film legend and take the fighting element of Godzilla: Destroy All Monsters Melee - Atari's smash fighting game which originally shipped in 2002 - to the next level with an all new Action Mode and online multiplayer fighting. Godzilla: Save the Earth is expected to be available Fall 2004 on the PlayStation2 computer entertainment system and Xbox video game system from Microsoft.

"Godzilla: Save the Earth combines the epic scope that is the hallmark of the landmark movies with an amazing single-player Action Mode to create the definitive adventure fighting game on any system," said Peter Wyse, executive producer at Atari. "With more monsters, more cities and more radioactive monster bashing, Godzilla fans won't believe the authenticity, while fighting and adventure gamers will have a unique experience with one of the best known film legends in the world!"

Players will have nine game modes to choose from, including Action, the mission-based single-player game; Challenges, a series of single-player challenges to complete; Custom, where players can set the parameters of a fight; Versus, the classic one-on-one melee battle; and many more. The game also includes mini games, including rail-type arcade sequences.

In the single-player game, G-Force scientists have cracked Godzilla's genetic code from samples obtained during the Vortaak invasion. Scientists have refined the code to grow super-enriched "Godzilla-Matter" - a virtually indestructible substance with the exact physical properties as Godzilla's radioactive back spikes. The Vortaak learn of the Godzilla Matter and strike Monster Island in an attempt to steal G-Cells and seize control of Earth's monsters. As Godzilla, the player awakens and fights to stop the UFOs from stealing G-Cells, and to free his fellow monsters from captivity. Throughout the game's missions, Vorticia sends waves of monsters, UFOs, mind-controlled military and earth-threatening devices at Godzilla, who must fight to defeat the enemies and find the hidden G-Cells before the UFOs can steal them.

The epic battle for Earth will range across the globe in more than a dozen massive, destructible city environments, including San Francisco, Los Angeles, Tokyo, Osaka and New York. Environments have been enhanced and enlarged, featuring hills, oceans, harbors and mountains. All structures in the game have advanced destruction mechanics, enabling them to be partially damaged or completely destroyed through multiple impacts. Striking larger buildings will produce dynamically generated gouges that expose the internal skeletal structure before they eventually crumble to the ground.

Both the PlayStation2 and Xbox versions will feature a variety of online multiplayer options for up to four players where gamers can smash, bash and trash opposing monsters and cities in gargantuan online melees. Player will be able to go head-to-head, three- or four-player free-for-all, or team up for two-on-two combat.

Godzilla will face off against more than 18 classic Toho movie monsters, each carefully designed to recreate the authentic film look and feel. Monsters include Godzilla 2000 and 90s, King Ghidorah, Gigan, Mothra, SpaceGodzilla, Biollante and many more.

Developed by Eugene, Oregon-based Pipeworks, the masterminds behind *Godzilla: Destroy All Monsters Melee*, *Godzilla: Save the Earth* is expected to ship in Fall 2004 for the PlayStation2 computer entertainment system and Xbox video game system from Microsoft.

Baseball Video Games Tout Realism

For videogame fans, there's really no need to be taken out to the ballgame when five virtual versions are as close as your gaming system of choice.

The veteran of the group is *MVP Baseball* from EA Sports, which produces the gold standard of sports games. Next up is *MLB 2005* from 989 Sports, which makes titles for the Sony PlayStation2. Sega's entry is *ESPN Baseball*, and Acclaim's title is *All-Star Baseball 2005*. For the younger set, there's Atari's *Backyard Baseball*, which features more than a dozen major league players as youngsters.

All these games have stunning graphics, smooth game play, a variety of skill levels and "franchise" modes for those who'd rather emulate the behind-the-scenes workings of a big league ballclub. They faithfully reproduce big league ballparks past and present down to the smallest details. They're all rated "E" for everyone. And if you don't have a willing or challenging opponent at home, you can play online with all the games except *Backyard Baseball*.

Although each game is licensed both by Major League Baseball and the players' association, Barry Bonds isn't in any of them. The San Francisco Giants slugger opted out of the deal that major leaguers sign with the players' union to have their names and likeness used. If you want Bonds, you'll have to concoct him from scratch from the "create a player" menus.

Speaking of creating players, MLB 2005 users who also have Sony's Eye Toy can literally get their heads into the game. The Eye Toy can be used as a camera to capture your face and create yourself as a player. You then become a free agent, free to be inserted into the lineup of your choice.

The scouting reports:

MVP Baseball from EA Sports (for PlayStation2, Xbox, PC and Nintendo GameCube)

Although the graphics are not that sharp, this title is by far the strongest when it comes to overall game play. The basic skills like hitting, pitching and fielding flow naturally, so the game is easy to learn yet tough to master.

The game also has a "big-play control" that adds a nice touch. You use the right joystick to do things like climb a wall to rob a home run, execute a hook slide to avoid a tag, or plow through an opposing catcher to try to knock the ball loose at the plate.

The game also features a home run derby, which naturally suffers from the absence of Bonds. But this year it adds a pitching competition, where you can face off two hurlers who battle to see who can get the most strikeouts while yielding the fewest hits.

For those who like their ballplayers less well-paid and less spoiled, you can play with any of the AAA or AA minor league clubs.

Rating: three and a half stars out of four.

MLB 2005 by 989 Sports (for PlayStation2)

This title is the best at capturing different players' styles. The various batting stances and pitching motions provide the most realistic imitation of actual big leaguers.

The trajectory of balls that are hit or thrown also seems the most realistic. Players seem to cover distances on the field in proportion to the dimensions of the ballpark. There is one quirk, though: When a ball is hit, there's a short gap between the time it strikes the bat and takes off. That often makes it look like the ball is a grounder, when it's actually a fly ball.

The game makes it easy to track batted balls, with a large baseball showing up on the field where the ball is expected to come down.

Vin Scully handles the play-by-play chores on the title, with Dave Campbell doing the color.

Rating: two and a half stars out of four.

ESPN Baseball by Sega (for Xbox and PlayStation2):

The graphics on this game are a cut above the others. Between the sharp rendition of players and stadiums and the ESPN-style look and music, at first glance an unsuspecting guest might think this game was real.

Well-done features include an "effort" meter that lets a pitcher reach back for a little extra to get an important out. On the other hand, you can cut back on your speed when facing a light-hitting batter, saving your strength for the big boppers.

If your pitcher is getting hit hard, his "confidence" meter goes down, but when he mows down a couple of hitters in a row, his confidence soars and he continues on a roll. Hitters and fielders also perform better when their confidence levels are high.

This game also has a new feature this year - first-person baseball. If you choose this option, you can see the game through the eyes of any player on the field. Another option is The Duel: a game that pits two teams consisting of a pitcher and hitter. Its an interesting twist on the game - but is rendered almost useless by the annoying, over-the-top wrestling-style commentary by Rex Huddler. Either you'll want to avoid the feature, or try it with Huddler's voice turned off.

Veteran announcers Jon Miller and Karl Ravish handle the basic announcing duties.

Rating: three stars out of four.

All-Star Baseball 2005 (for PlayStation2 and Xbox)

The graphics are pretty sharp on this one, too - second by a whisker to the ESPN game. The title's biggest feature is what Acclaim calls its "FielderCam." It lets you see the game the way the players on the field do. For example, when a ball is hit, the scene shifts to the player nearest the ball.

It's a feature some players will, with practice, grow to love. But for most of us, it's a difficult reminder why most of us play baseball video games, not big-league baseball. However, the first-person perspective is a welcome feature for pitching, giving a real feel for what it's like to stand on the mound.

A feature called This Week In Baseball Challenge allows you to relive or revise historic moments from last season. For example, you can see what might have happened if that Cubs fan never messed with the catchable foul ball that could have put the Cubs in the World Series.

The game has other really nice touches like a virtual tour of all current major league parks, plus some old ones, like the Polo Grounds in New York and the Houston Astrodome.

For those who want a little Latin flavor, you can have the play-by-play in Spanish. The English commentary is handled by Thom Brennemann and Steve Lyons.

Rating: three stars out of four.

Backyard Baseball from Atari (for PlayStation2 and Nintendo Game Cube)

This title features pint-sized versions of about a dozen of today's top players, along with members of the backyard gang made famous by the series of games from Humongous Entertainment.

The title is easy to play - a plus for youngsters who aren't up to the complexity of grown-up games. And the different power-ups for both pitchers and hitters make the game interesting. For example, if you earn the "butter fingers" power-up, when you swing the bat, the opposing team gets spattered with butter, making it tough for them to field the ball.

There are no major league ballparks, but there's a great variety of sandlot fields, some equipped with lights.

Rating: three stars out of four.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Experts Race to Fix Serious Internet Flaw

Computer security experts in the United States and Britain today confirmed that a new method has been identified that could make it easy for hackers to disrupt Internet communications worldwide, prompting a months-long, quiet effort to convince Internet service providers and other operators of the global telecommunications system to upgrade their systems.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security issued an alert Tuesday afternoon warning that the vulnerability could be used to "affect a large segment of the Internet community."

The exploit, identified by 36-year-old Milwaukee security researcher Paul Watson, could give hackers the ability to crash Internet routers - the complex machines that direct most of the world's Web traffic.

The method that Watson identified takes advantage of an inherent design flaw in transmission control protocol (TCP) - the language that all computers use to communicate on the Internet - that could place ordinary computers at greater risk of attack.

Watson, who is scheduled to present his findings at a security conference in Canada later this week, could not be immediately reached for comment. A notice on the conference's Web site and Watson's own site, www.terrorist.net, indicates that he still plans to share the full details of his research.

Specific details about the vulnerability were published for the first time today by British security officials who said a successful attack using the flaw could significantly disrupt online communications.

"The exploitation of this vulnerability could have affected the glue that holds the Internet together," said Roger Cumming, director of the National Infrastructure Security and Coordination Center in the United Kingdom.

"Fixing it is a small but significant step to aid the overall stability of the Internet."

The NISCC and its peers in the United States, Canada and Australia have been working with Cisco Systems Inc., Juniper Networks Inc., and all of the major Internet router manufacturers to address the problem, NISCC officials said.

Rob Sturgeon, vice president of customer service for Juniper Networks, said the company began working with the NISCC in December and released a patch several weeks ago to protect its customers. Juniper is not aware of anyone exploiting the flaw, he said.

A Cisco spokesman declined to comment on the situation. Spokespeople for two major Internet backbone operators, AT&T and MCI's UUNet division, also declined to comment.

Amit Yoran, director of the cybersecurity division for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, conceded the seriousness of the problem but said most of the world's major Internet service providers had already taken steps to prevent the attack.

"It's important to note that this is a significant discovery, but it's also important to provide a fair degree of assurance that the sky is not falling," Yoran said.

Security experts disagreed over how easily hackers could take advantage of the vulnerability. The problem might be much worse, they said, if Watson follows through on his plans to publish explicit instructions on how to exploit the flaw in his research.>

Security experts have known for years about the basic vulnerability that Watson identified, which theoretically could allow attackers to shut down Internet routers remotely by tricking them into resetting themselves. The challenge has always been that attackers must successfully guess several specific sets of information about the intended targets, a process that many thought would take even powerful computers several years to complete.

According to Marcus Sachs, director of the SANS Internet Storm Center and a former top White House security official, Watson appears to have discovered a way to dramatically shorten the time it takes to guess that information to just a few minutes.

But Michael Sutton, director of Reston, Va.-based security company iDefense Labs, said such an attack still would be very difficult to execute, even employing tools based on Watson's research.

This guy has certainly lessened the difficulty, but it looks like this would still be pretty tough to do," Sutton said. "What's he done is take this from a theoretical problem to one that's practical but difficult."

Sachs said the concern generated by the vulnerability is reminiscent of

what happened two years ago in the wake of the discovery of a serious security flaw in the ubiquitous "simple network management protocol," a low-level communications language used by all machines that connect to the Internet.

At the time, the problem was thought to be so serious that the nation's top computer security officials were called in to the White House to brief President Bush on the problem.

"Many of us thought the end of the Internet was near. We thought for sure it would be simple for attackers to put two and two together and cause widespread Internet instability with SNMP," Sachs said. "We all held our breath for a while, but nothing happened. So, it's really hard to predict whether we'll see the same thing happen here."

Senate Revives Ban on Taxing Internet

Sen. John McCain worked Friday to revive a bill banning taxes on Internet connections, a measure that bogged down last year amid worries that state and local governments could lose billions in tax revenue.

Senators have been battling since a temporary ban ran out nearly six months ago.

McCain, R-Ariz., the chairman of the Commerce Committee, would propose banning taxes for four years on services that connect the consumer to the Internet, said congressional officials speaking on condition of anonymity. States exempted from the original ban, enacted in 1998, would be given three years to eliminate their taxes. States that tax DSL connection services would have two years to end their levies.

Congress first barred taxes on Internet connections in 1998. Technologies never envisioned then now let consumers enjoy faster services, download movies and music and leave their wired connections behind. Some companies have started offering traditional telephone services using Internet technology.

While rewriting the ban on Internet access taxes, House lawmakers broadened it to cover DSL, satellite and cable hookups.

The issue divides Senate Republicans, some of whom believe the federal government has no business telling state and local governments how to tax telecommunications.

Others want to make sure the ban doesn't drain billions in taxes from state and local governments, many of them facing tight budgets. They pointed to an analysis by the Congressional Budget Office, a nonpartisan agency that analyzes legislation, which predicted that "substantial revenue losses" might result from state and local governments' inability to collect taxes on certain types of telecommunication services that are provided over the Internet.

The key to compromise would be the language defining the technologies covered by the tax prohibition, said aides to Democratic and Republican senators who have said first draft went too far.

The Senate scheduled debate on Monday, its first since Republican leaders

pulled the bill from consideration last fall when lawmakers failed to strike a deal.

Dave McClure, president of the U.S. Internet Industry Association and spokesman for the Consumer Internet Access Coalition, said the question is straightforward ? to tax or not to tax?

"We're pretty confident that at the end of the day, no member of the Senate is going to stand up in front C-SPAN and say, 'I want to see higher taxes on the Internet,'" he said.

FTC to Look Closer at 'Spyware'

A relatively new kind of software that resides in many computers and tracks its users' Web-surfing habits or triggers pop-up advertisements has come under scrutiny by federal regulators who have already cracked down on deceptive or misleading spam.

The Federal Trade Commission today is hosting a daylong workshop in Washington to discuss the effects of hidden software that may be used to control or spy on a computer without its user's knowledge.

So far most "spyware" and "adware" programs, often placed on Windows PCs by such downloaded programs as file-sharing programs, appear to have been used for the relatively benign purpose of tracking consumer preferences, said Howard Beales, director of the FTC's consumer protection division. The FTC is watching to see if criminals start making widespread use of this technology to steal credit-card and Social Security numbers of unwitting computer users, he said.

"So far [we] haven't thought that it warranted regulation," he said.

Privacy experts and makers of anti-spyware software say the FTC's light-touch approach leaves too many consumers vulnerable to more unwanted advertising or even the addition of controls that consumers might not realize are on their computer.

"There's a number of concerns about spyware, which is that it takes away consumers' control over their computers," said Ari Schwartz, associate director of the Center for Democracy and Technology in Washington. "We consider privacy to be a control issue as well," and many spyware programs act as surveillance tools for advertisers without the users' consent, he said. In February, the group filed a complaint with the FTC arguing for stricter enforcement against two companies involved in using software for allegedly deceptive and unfair ads.

The software generally enters a person's computer when he or she downloads and installs free music or game programs, for example. Often, popular downloaded programs such as Kazaa and Grokster require users to agree to a licensing agreement that allows the addition of adware to the computer's hard drive, legal agreements that Beales and privacy experts concede many consumers do not fully read. Other, more underhanded spyware developers automatically install spyware without the knowledge or informed consent of the user, privacy experts and software makers said.

Estimating how many computers carry spyware or adware is difficult, in part because many consumers do not know they have it, said Nate Elliott, an

analyst with Jupiter Research. Some companies consider "cookies," which are small data files that Web sites can place on a computer to store information about a user's online activity, to be a form of software, but cookies are not programs and cannot control computer functions.

Last week, Internet service provider EarthLink Inc. and anti-spyware software maker Webroot Software Inc. said a three-month audit of slightly more than 1 million computers found 29.5 million pieces of spyware, or nearly 28 per computer. Almost 24 million of these items, however, were cookies.

"We think the problem is bigger than anyone understood," said David Moll, chief executive of Webroot of Boulder, Colo. In particular, "drive-by" downloads, which occur when Web sites exploit weaknesses in Microsoft's widely used Internet Explorer browser to install spyware and adware surreptitiously, are increasingly a problem, he said.

Roger Thompson, vice president of product development of Pest Patrol of Carlyle, Pa., said: "The issue is that there is no line between good behavior and bad behavior." Although a minority of spyware is used for "malicious" purposes, "it opens a back door that allows computers to be updated by the hacker and accept commands to log keystrokes, read files, or turn on the Web cam," he said.

Federal and state legislators have taken notice. U.S. Sens. Conrad Burns (R-Mont.), Ron Wyden (D-Ore.), and Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) have introduced legislation that would prohibit the installation of software on a computer without notice and consent, and would require easy ways to remove it. Utah enacted legislation last month, and state legislatures in California and Iowa are considering action.

While some software installers are sneaky or fraudulent, the bigger problem may be that consumers neglect to read the fine print before loading programs, said David Sorkin, a professor at the John Marshall Law School in Chicago. "It's pretty hard to install controls beyond that contract."

Justice Dept. Cracks Down on Net Piracy

An international effort to dismantle major Internet piracy groups has identified more than 100 people in the United States and abroad involved in the theft of more than \$50 million in music, movies, games and computer software, U.S. authorities said Thursday.

Synchronized searches by the FBI in 27 states and by other authorities in 10 countries beginning Wednesday resulted in the seizure of more than 200 computers, including 30 servers used as storage and distribution hubs for the material, Attorney General John Ashcroft said. One server contained over 65,000 titles.

"This is thievery," Ashcroft told reporters. "This is criminal."

The initiative, dubbed "Operation Fastlink," is the largest of its kind undertaken by the Justice Department against piracy of intellectual property over the Internet. The film, music and software industries have been pushing for greater criminal prosecution while in some cases pursuing their own civil cases.

Industry officials applauded the enforcement action.

"Today is a good day for creative artists," said John Malcolm, chief of antipiracy operations for the Motion Picture Association and a former senior Justice Department official. "Without copyright protection and enforcement, piracy will dramatically and deleteriously impact the future of the American film industry."

Although no arrests were announced, Ashcroft said charges would be brought against some of the people. They could face copyright infringement and conspiracy charges, among others, punishable by up to five years in prison on each count.

The search warrants, which remained sealed under court order, targeted organizations known by such names as Fairlight, Kalisto, Echelon, Class, Project X and APC, officials said. These groups were described as the origination points of the pirated material, which first goes to a select clientele via secure computer servers and quickly becomes available worldwide on the Internet.

The organizations obtain their material through a variety of means, including film industry insiders who leak copies of movies before they are released publicly, people who test new software for manufacturers and highly trained "crackers" who break encryption codes on products. In many cases, officials said, the goal is not so much making a profit as it is the thrill of subverting the system.

The Justice Department crackdown has not targeted the end-users of these pirated products, who in general can be prosecuted if they download 10 or more illegal copies of copyrighted material worth \$2,500 or more.

One FBI raid occurred early Wednesday at a school district near Phoenix. Ashcroft would not discuss specifics but said it is not surprising to find that such activity occurs at schools and universities because of the abundance of high-powered computers.

The searches were also executed in Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Israel, the Netherlands, Singapore, Sweden, Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Many E-Mail Marketers Fail To Comply With Can-Spam

Many leading e-mail marketers fail to comply with the federal Can-Spam Act, a market research firm said Tuesday.

A study of 50 of the largest marketers found a third failing to meet the requirements of the act, which includes making it illegal to send unsolicited bulk email without giving people the option to opt-out, JupiterResearch, a division of Jupitermedia Corp., said.

While many of the marketers provided consumers with a mechanism to stop receiving the spam, many failed to meet other requirements of the law, the research firm said.

For example, 36 percent of the marketers failed to include the street address of the sender, nearly a quarter continued to send email marketing messages after opt-outs were submitted, and 16 percent sent messages after

the legally prescribed 10-business-day period.

"E-mail marketers that are not complying with these most basic aspects of the law are leaving their company unnecessarily exposed to the risk of legislation, fines and doing what amounts to a virtual high wire act without a net," JupiterResearch analyst David Daniels said in a statement.

The research firm advised marketers to diligently scrutinize offers, adopt automatic opt-out suppression routines and accept opt-out requests to sending addresses to mitigate risks and fully comply with the law.

EU to Step Up Internet Safety for Children

European Union communications ministers unveiled a new 50 million euro (\$59.4 million) plan on Thursday to make the Internet safer for children.

The four-year program, announced at an informal meeting of EU ministers in Ireland, the current holder of the EU presidency, aims to increase the use of filtering technology and public hotlines to combat illegal Internet content.

Irish Communications Minister Dermot Ahern, hosting the EU conference on broadband, said that while Internet technology was bringing huge benefits to the public and businesses, it was up to legislators to protect the vulnerable from its dangers.

"As ministers we intend tackling these issues and the Commission's safety blueprint provides us with a raft of new measures," he said in a statement.

The plan, due to begin next year, was announced as an EU survey showed that nearly half of all young people in northern Europe have been approached to meet in person after making initial contact with a stranger online.

The survey, by EU Safety, Awareness, Facts and Tools, a cross-European project to promote the safe use of the Internet, found 46 percent of children in northern Europe who chat on the Internet say someone has asked to meet them and that 14 percent had actually done so.

A Eurobarometer survey published in March has found half of parents in Europe do not think their children would know what to do if a situation on the Internet made them uncomfortable.

The ten countries due to join the 15-member bloc in May will participate in the plan, which Ahern said would include public safety campaigns and expansion of telephone hotlines for reporting dangerous Internet sites.

Why EU Socked It to Microsoft

The European Commission has more than doubled the fine it had originally planned in its antitrust case against Microsoft Corp. because of Microsoft's considerable financial resources, according to the full text of the decision, due for publication this week.

The decision, which leaked widely on Thursday and was published by the

online edition of the Wall Street Journal, shows that the EC relied extensively on information from Microsoft's competitors, as well as on internal memos from Microsoft itself. Microsoft responded with a seven-page evisceration of the decision, arguing it "creates new law in an effort to justify unprecedented regulatory intervention." The EC is the executive arm of the European Union.

The more than 300-page document gives a lengthy justification for the EC's record fine, citing case history, evidence from competitors, market data and Microsoft's internal correspondence. In arriving at an amount for the fine, for example, the EC examined Microsoft's financial standing and its refusal to change its business practices over the course of the investigation.

Initially, the commission planned to fine Microsoft 165.7 million euros, the decision said, "to reflect the gravity of the infringement." Later, the commission doubled that figure to 331.5 million euros, "in order to ensure a sufficient deterrent effect on Microsoft."

The doubling was necessary because "Microsoft is currently the largest company in the world by market capitalization," the decision noted in footnote 1,342, referring to Microsoft's \$49 million cash reserve in June 2003, its 41 percent profit margin overall in the 2002-2003 fiscal year, and its 81 percent profit margin on Windows in the same time period.

Finally, the commission increased the fine by another 50 percent, to 497 million euros (\$613 million) because the company refused to alter its business practices during the course of the investigation. The duration of Microsoft's two abuses-refusing to supply server compatibility information and tying Windows to media player software-together added up to five years and five months in duration, the decision said.

The commission's decision is partly based on an array of internal corporate memos, which offer an illuminating picture of Microsoft's own attitudes to its software and business practices. In a memo from Bill Gates, for example, the company's chairman makes it clear that the loyalty of application makers is due not so much to the superiority of Windows as to the difficulty of making Windows applications cross-platform.

"The Windows API is so broad, so deep and so functional that most ISVs would be crazy not to use it," said the Feb. 21, 1997, memo, drafted for Gates by C++ General Manager Aaron Contorer. "It is so deeply embedded in the source code of many Windows apps that there is a huge switching cost to using a different operating system instead. ... It is this switching cost that has given customers the patience to stick with Windows through all our mistakes, our buggy drivers, our high TCO, our lack of a sexy vision at times, and many other difficulties.

"In short, without this exclusive franchise called the Windows API, we would have been dead a long time ago," the memo said.

In its response, Microsoft argued that the decision - which it plans to appeal - would strip dominant companies of their incentives to innovate. For one thing, the decision "opens the door for even a single complaining component supplier to argue that innovation should be thwarted if its market position may be harmed," Microsoft said.

The commission's way of narrowly defining markets, and of considering companies with 30 percent to 40 percent market share as dominant, would give the decision too wide a scope, Microsoft argued. "These rulings put at

risk the economic incentives for a broad range of companies and industries," the company said.

Netscape Browser Rises from the Dead

The Netscape Web browser may not be dead after all. After being written off by industry observers last year, the Netscape Internet software package will be updated by America Online, and could be released as early as next month.

The update appears part to be a broader effort by AOL to revitalize the Netscape brand it acquired in a \$4.2 billion deal in 1998.

AOL is also testing a new Netscape Desktop Navigator product and in January launched the Netscape Internet service, a low-cost Internet service provider.

The Netscape update will replace the aging version 7.1, released in mid-2003. The new release, which could come as early as next month, will likely be called 7.2 and will be based on version 1.7 of Mozilla, an upcoming release of the Mozilla Internet application suite, a source familiar with the product plans says.

An AOL spokesperson contacted Thursday hadn't gotten back to IDG News Service with comments by Friday afternoon.

Netscape 7.1 is based on Mozilla 1.4, which was first released in June last year. A first beta of Mozilla 1.7 became available last month, according to the Mozilla Web site. The Mozilla bundle includes a browser, e-mail, and newsgroup client as well as a chat client and Web page editor and offers features such as tabbed browsing and pop-up blocking.

Analysts had said that the death knell was sounding for the Netscape browser after AOL last year laid off essentially all of its Netscape software developers and ended development work on the Mozilla browser technology.

Development work was taken over by the Mozilla open source project, which was originally started in early 1998 by Netscape Communications and continued when AOL acquired Netscape later that year. Last year the people behind Mozilla created a foundation, largely funded by a \$2 million pledge from AOL, to build, support, and promote Mozilla products.

In addition to a browser suite update, AOL has quietly started beta testing a new product called the Netscape Desktop Navigator that offers access to localized Web content - based on the user's zip code - through a round user interface that resembles a coaster. The beta version of the Netscape Desktop Navigator is available for download.

The center of the coaster contains an Internet search bar, news headlines, and weather while the edges are buttons for pulling up various kinds of information from the Web, including movie and TV times, phone books, maps, personals, and shopping.

Information shown in the Netscape Desktop Navigator is provided by AOL and partners such as InfoSpace. The information first appears in a screen that folds down over the coaster, but another click will open the user's default

Web browser, which could be Microsoft's Internet Explorer.

The updated browser bundle and the Desktop Navigator will likely be offered as a bundle, says Richard Doherty, research director at The Envisioneering Group in Seaford, New York. Doherty says he first heard that an update to the Netscape browser is in the works from former AOL employees.

"I believe it will be a super download: you can have Netscape 7.2 and add on Desktop Navigator," he says.

Netscape was the most popular browser in the early years of the Web. However, its market share started crumbling when Microsoft introduced Internet Explorer in the mid-nineties. The acquisition of Netscape by Microsoft rival AOL and a lengthy antitrust trial could not change the browser's fortune.

Microsoft's Internet Explorer held 96 percent of the browser market in March 2004, leaving just 4 percent to be divided between Netscape, Apple Computer's Safari, and other browsers including Opera, from Opera Software and Mozilla, according to San Diego-based Web tracking company WebSideStory.

Philippine Co. Creates New Software

A Philippine-based company unveiled software Thursday that would allow Windows-based programs to run on computers using the rival Linux operating system.

Peter Valdes, chief technology officer of SpecOps Labs Inc., said his company's software will help millions of users "migrate" from Windows machines to the free and open-source Linux platform.

"After you install the bridge software ... it is as if you have a Windows OS (operating system) on your desktop," he said.

Valdes noted that one big obstacle to propagating the use of Linux is the massive expense required to retrain users of Windows applications.

Several other companies have developed software that combines Linux's underpinnings with a Windows-like interface, but they generally cannot run programs written for Windows.

Previous attempts to run Windows word processors, spreadsheets and other applications smoothly on Linux machines have been largely unsuccessful and cumbersome, Valdes said.

Asked to comment on SpecOps' new software, Microsoft Philippines spokeswoman Mae Rivera told Dow Jones Newswires: "We know very little about it. We can only give our comment when we know more about that software."

SpecOps said the 80-megabyte program will be available commercially by the end of the year at a still-undetermined price. It said it expects to sell more than 30,000 copies of the program and generate about US\$1 million in gross revenues in the first year.

Since the first Linux was created in 1991 by Linus Torvalds of Finland, its code has been made available for free, provided improvements also are

shared freely.

Microsoft and other proprietary software vendors keep their source code protected by patents.

Tests Find Theoretical Data Speed Limit

If there is an article of faith in computer science, it's that everything can keep getting faster and faster.

But scientists say they've discovered an apparent speed limit that will restrict how quickly data can be written onto disks and then retrieved.

The good news: This limit is about 1,000 times faster than today's state-of-the-art data storage devices.

When information is stored on disks, minuscule regions that make up each bit of data are magnetized in one direction or its opposite, to represent a 0 or a 1. Rewriting data involves sending an electromagnetic pulse that reverses the spin of selected bits. Accelerate the pulse and you shorten the time needed to store or rewrite information.

But if the pulses come too quickly and intensely, the high energy involved makes some of the magnetic changes happen randomly instead of predictably and reliably, according to a group of researchers writing in Wednesday's edition of the journal *Nature*.

The scientists confirmed this problem by firing up the particle accelerator at Stanford University and blasting electrons at a piece of the magnetic material used to store computer data.

These pulses of energy traveled at nearly the speed of light, and lasted just 2.3 picoseconds. A picosecond is a millionth of a millionth of a second.

The researchers noticed that the magnetic patterns left behind were somewhat chaotic, an unacceptable outcome when it comes to storing precise bits of data.

The project was led by researchers at Stanford and included a scientist at the Landau Institute for Theoretical Physics in Moscow and engineers at disk-drive maker Seagate Technologies LLC.

The group was the first to examine the physics of magnetic data storage with a particle accelerator, according to two scientists who were not involved in the experiments, C.H. Back of Germany's University of Regensburg and Danilo Pescia of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology.

In an e-mail interview, Pescia said the experiments were important in that they showed that the speed of magnetic recording - which already clocks in at several billion bits, or gigabits, per second in the fastest hard drives - can still get 1,000 times faster.

"In order to go beyond this limit, some completely new technology will be required, of which we do not know anything yet," Pescia wrote.

However, Seagate's chief technology officer, Mark Kryder, said the project

had few real implications for the data-storage industry.

"Certainly we are not going to start packaging linear accelerators into hard disk drives, so the kinds of speeds achieved in these experiments would never be observed in an actual recording device," Kryder said. "It's not something that's going to impact anything we're contemplating in hard disk drives."

N.H. Official Seeks to Help With Bill

The state attorney general's office has intervened on behalf of a couple who ran up more than \$3,400 in phone bills after running an America Online program designed to improve their Internet connection.

Ken Pedersen, 67, of Litchfield, said he ran AOL's AutoFix on Feb. 26 because he kept losing his Internet connection.

After running the program, Pedersen's service improved, but his dial-up number had changed without his knowledge from a free local call to a regional toll call, he said.

Then from Feb. 26 to March 15, the Pedersens left their computer on day and night with the Internet connected, tallying thousands of minutes of toll calls.

The Pedersens says they didn't realize their dial-up number was changed to a toll call until they received their phone bill. They now owe Verizon \$3,424.

AOL has said that its program is not responsible for the problem and it will not pay the bill.

Frustrated, the Pedersens sent complaints to the Federal Communications Commission, the Better Business Bureau and the Attorney General's Office.

Senior Assistant Attorney General M. Kristin Spath, who works in the Consumer Protection and Antitrust Bureau, has sent a letter to AOL's legal department asking the Internet giant to participate in the state's voluntary mediation program.

"We believe it may be possible for this complaint to be resolved through voluntary mediation," Spath wrote on April 2, adding that successful mediation requires a "proper regard for customer satisfaction and a spirit of compromise."

AOL spokesman Nicholas Graham said the company received the letter and was formulating a response, which it hoped to send by the end of business Friday.

"AOL always cooperates and works with attorney generals' offices to help make them more aware of our customer care practice," Graham said.

AOL's response to the attorney general will not address remediation, however. Instead, it will "provide them with the answers that we think will inform and educate them as to exactly what the (AutoFix) process is," Graham said.

For now, the Pedersens have decided to pay only their normal monthly bill of \$24.84. They canceled both their Verizon and AOL service on March 24 and now subscribe to Adelphia's high speed cable Internet service.

"AOL never switches, reroutes, redirects or changes any access numbers for any consumers at any time, ever," Graham said. "And there has never been documented any kind of glitch or software malfunction that would do this. The AutoFix process works extremely well."

Despite the attorney general's intervention, Pedersen said he is not optimistic that AOL will help with their phone bill. He is more hopeful that Verizon will be accommodating.

In these situations, Verizon considers compromise solutions on an individual basis, company spokesman Alan Cort said.

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